

to promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which are here in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

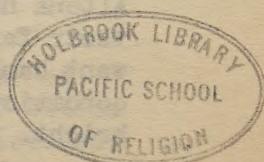
Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

per 132

April, 1948

The Renaissance of a Rural Community

By J. Winfield Fretz*



For twenty-five years the population trend in America has been toward the cities. Urban communities have been growing and rural communities dying. There are those who say that the advocates of a revival of rural life are struggling for a lost cause; that to emphasize the importance of rural life is to be looking backward; that the century of the future is the century of the cities.

The thesis of this article is directly to the contrary. It is our contention that the future of society must have its hope in the rural community; that the rural areas are of increasing importance, because they are the seedbeds of our country's population; they are the areas in which Christian ideals, moral values, and standards of conduct and behavior of the highest type will be produced and maintained. It is here that democracy at its best and in its purest form can thrive.

Our contention is not that the rural community of yesterday be restored after the fashion of a museum display, but rather that the rural community be enriched and modified in the light of new inventions and improved methods of living. The rural community of today needs to be revitalized not left to stagnate and die.

Altona, Manitoba

A community that illustrates the thesis of this article is the small community of Altona, Manitoba. It has a population of about 1,000 inhabitants in the town with an equal number scattered in the surrounding hinterland. Ninety-nine per cent of the population is Mennonite. Altona is located just six miles north of the International Border and seventy-five miles southwest of Winnipeg. It was settled by the Mennonite immigrants who came to Canada in the 1870's with a few added by later migrations. On the treeless prairies in this area the early settlers were among the first to demonstrate that it was possible to live and farm on family-sized units on the open prairies. These

* Dr. J. Winfield Fretz is professor of economics and rural sociology at Newton College. He has traveled widely and has made some of our most useful studies in the development of Christian rural communities. Dr. Fretz's paper appeared first in *MENNONTIE LIFE*. We are grateful both to *MENNONTIE LIFE* and to him for permission to share it with members of the Christian Rural Fellowship.

first settlers introduced new types of watermelon, muskmelon, and sunflower seeds into Canada. They established themselves at first in villages which were clusters of twenty to thirty farm families with ten-acre lots spread along both sides of a broad main street. These lots served as space for dwelling houses, barns, yards, orchards, flower and vegetable gardens. The usual hardships of pioneer life were experienced, but through perseverance they were overcome, and in due time a stable community was established.

The early years of the new century were relatively normal years; then came World War I with its accompanying boom in building expansion and rise in prices. Following this, the depression with its low prices, vanishing markets, and the consequent period of economic strain. The depression hit Altona hard. Young people fled to the cities looking for jobs; farmers lost their farms in wholesale fashion and seemingly well-established businesses went bankrupt. The early thirties found Altona in anything but flourishing condition and, like thousands of other prairie towns, the outlook was far from bright.

Attacking the Problem

Everybody admitted that times were bad. Some were pessimistic, others fatalistic, and still others were certain that some new steps needed to be taken but were afraid to launch out for fear of opposition and criticism. There was a small group of Altona citizens, however, who belonged neither to the pessimists, the fatalists, or the fearful. This small group belonged to the courageous, the far-sighted, and the hopeful. There were men of vision who were determined to do whatever needed to be done to pierce the oppressing clouds of economic darkness that lingered gloomily overhead. A group of twelve interested farmers, led by their energetic leader, J. J. Siemens, met one day in 1931 to discuss their personal and community problems. They were determined to stop the rate of farm foreclosures, the growing tenancy rate, and the frightening increase of unemployment. This small band of twelve decided to find sixty other farmers who were interested in joining together to form an Agricultural Society. They found sixty additional farmers and, under the direction of the Manitoba Department of Agriculture, organized the first and only all-Mennonite Agricultural Society in Canada. The chief purpose of the Society was to study local community problems and to work together toward their solution.

One of the first activities of the Society was to develop a program of education and activity for their young people. Junior and senior clubs, similar to 4-H clubs in the United States, were organized. Each club consisted of from twelve to fifteen members. The clubs concerned themselves with such enterprises as potato-seed, and grain-growing, calf-, chicken-, hog-, and live-stock-raising for boys; and cooking, canning, weaving, and baking-clubs for girls. In all, over 700 young people in the area were at one time participating in the program.

In 1936 the Agricultural Society organized the Rhineland Agricultural Institute for the purpose of carrying a systematic program of study and education for the out-of-school youth. Each winter 25 boys and 25 girls between the ages of 18 and 30 were chosen to enroll in the Institute. Most of the students were chosen from the 700 who had experience in club work. The instructions were given by local men and by men from the Extension Department of the University of Manitoba. Some of the local school boards became so interested that they began providing shop equipment and weaving material in the

local schools. Up to 1943 when the writer visited Altona and saw the work that had been done by the Agricultural Society through the Institute there were 250 young people who had benefited from the ten weeks' training courses.

The Fruits of Education

The wisdom of the twelve farmers who started things moving by organizing the Agricultural Society and later the Institute is already manifest. They started at the right place to solve their own and their community's problems, because they started with themselves. A number of clearly-recognized results can already be observed. (1) It provided a channel through which new and progressive farming ideas and methods were introduced into the community. (2) It provided a stimulus for young people to go on to college and university, as well as for many in the home community, better to prepare themselves for service locally. (3) It resulted in a greater appreciation for both the limitations and possibilities of the rural community. (4) It was to a large degree the agency most responsible for the economic rebirth of the whole community by its stimulation of the organization and growth of co-operative societies. (5) Through the newly-created co-operatives and the adult education programs a surprising amount of latent leadership was discovered and developed.

It is doubtful if any other community in the United States or Canada, whether Mennonite or non-Mennonite has developed such a vigorous and thorough-going program of co-operatives as has Altona, Manitoba. There are many examples of communities that have established flourishing co-operative ventures; but few if any have developed so many successful co-operative ventures in so short a time; and few other communities are contemplating such far-reaching and permanent economic changes in the direction of co-operatives in the future.

Co-ops Outgrowth of Mutual Aid

The co-operatives developed in Altona have their roots in the long-time expression of Mennonite mutual aid. One may say that co-operatives are indeed the stream-lined expression of mutual aid in that it is more highly systematized than much of the mutual aid in the past which was often quite spontaneous and sporadic. Mutual aid among the Mennonites goes back through their history in Russia and Prussia to Holland and Switzerland.

Two co-operative organizations now in operation in Altona are very old. What is now called the Mennonite Burial Aid Society was formerly known as the Mennonite Mutual Supporting Society. It had originally been organized in 1910 but was reorganized in 1940 to meet the requirements of provincial laws. The Red River Mutual Fire Insurance Company was chartered in 1941, but before that time had been operating for a long time as an unchartered aid society.

During the past fifteen years an impressive number of new co-operative ventures have been undertaken and to date all of these have survived and prospered.

The Rhineland Consumers Co-operative

In 1931 the Rhineland Consumers Co-op was organized to provide gasoline, oil, and service-station facilities to local citizens on a mutual basis. This society had a membership of 792 at the time of its 13th annual meeting in 1944. The financial statement revealed that for every dollar the shareholders had invested since the business had been started \$140.49 has been earned. A

portion of the annual net earnings, which during the previous fourteen months were over \$16,000 were used for educational purposes. Contributions out of the earnings were also made to worthy causes, such as the \$792 contribution to the Mennonite Collegiate Institute at Gretna in 1944 and \$1,000 to the Rhineland Agricultural Society for educational purposes.

Altona Co-operative Service Ltd.

In 1937 ten local men decided to take the initiative in forming a co-op store. They were tired of the way some of the local merchants had been exploiting local people by allowing them to run large accounts at their stores, then taking mortgages on their homes, and later foreclosing if the customers could not pay. The ten started with \$45 capital and added \$600 of borrowed money to buy stock. The first years were difficult and growth in membership and financial support was slow; however, at the end of the third year \$1,200 had been saved. A chance to buy a store came along and the group now known as the Altona Co-operative Services bought the store for \$14,600. Most of the money for this had to be borrowed. Following this, rapid progress was made. In 1944, seven years after its meager beginning, Altona Co-operative Services had assets of over \$67,000 and a membership of over 800. The annual sales in 1944 amounted to almost a quarter million dollars. The store is one of the largest and best-equipped general stores in the entire province of Manitoba. In the basement of the store are adequate facilities for candling and grading eggs up to 100 cases a day. Here farmers may bring their eggs and poultry and market them through the co-op with maximum net returns.

Credit Union

In February of 1939 nineteen local people agreed to form a credit union. They pooled their money and found they had a total of \$23. Today they have a membership of 316 with assets that total \$18,440. At the annual meeting in February 1944, the treasurer reported that loans of \$22,855 had been made to 197 members during the previous year. The Credit Union provides a place for local people to put their savings and at the same time a place to borrow small amounts of money at low rates of interest in case of necessity.

Rhineland Co-operative Hatchery

In 1940 the Rhineland Co-operative Hatchery was organized by a group of industrious farmers. They rented a local hatchery at first and started doing commercial and custom hatching. By the end of the first year there were sixty-eight farmers who had become members of the co-op hatchery. By 1942 additional units of brooders were added so that the hatchery had a 100,000 egg capacity. The enterprise is steadily growing, and it meets a vital need in the Altona community.

Farmers Co-operative Machine Shop

One of the most unique co-operative enterprises to be found anywhere is that of the Farmers' Co-operative Machine Shop in Altona. It is an organization resulting from a scarcity of new farm machinery and from the difficulty of getting old machinery repaired due to war shortages of material and labor. The Altona farmers, in the face of this difficulty, as in the face of many others, were wise in not trying to solve their local economic problems by running around getting signatures on a petition with which to protest to politicians. They had learned that the best way to solve problems was to get their heads together and work out their own solutions.

Thirteen farmers took the initiative and others soon joined them. Someone knew of shop equipment and machinery that was for sale; others knew of a vacant garage in town that could be rented; someone else knew of an expert mechanic who had left Altona to take a job in a Winnipeg defense plant, but who it was thought would be willing to return to Altona if a job were offered him. The farmers pooled their money, their brains, and their energy, and the result was a co-operatively owned and an expertly managed machine shop in which they were prepared to do their own farm-machine welding, rebuilding, and repairing. An illustration of the need this enterprise met is the fact that seven men found employment in the shop during the first year and the cash income from sales and service amounted to over \$24,000.

The Co-operative Vegetable Oils Ltd.

Whatever new needs to be done in Altona now seems as a matter of course to be done co-operatively. For almost two years the farmers of Altona had discussed ways of changing and improving their agricultural practices so that they, and all those who depend on agriculture for a living, would not be solely dependent on a single crop, such as wheat. They came to the conclusion that certain oil-producing crops, such as sunflowers, argentine rape, flax, beans, and peas could be grown in this section of Manitoba without difficulty. Some of the more enterprising farmers had experimented and could talk from experience. The farmers, therefore, organized Vegetable Oils Ltd., investigated carefully the future market for such oils, the number of farmers who would be willing to produce these crops, the government's attitude toward their growth, the most profitable way to market them, and the cost of erecting an extracting plant. After all these investigations and numerous discussions it was agreed to proceed with plans to raise \$15,000 share capital for the purpose of building a plant. A building 30 feet by 90 feet was completed for purposes of housing the plant; and another of equal size was completed to be used for storage, drying and cleaning. This venture may bring far-reaching changes not only into Altona but into the whole of Southern Manitoba.

Co-operative growth in southern Manitoba has not been confined to the Altona community. There are co-operative developments in the surrounding towns and villages. In an effort to consolidate the numerous co-ops in this area the Southern Manitoba Federation was organized in 1942. This organization had its headquarters in Altona and employed six people in its auditing and educational program. The Federation was temporarily discontinued because of internal differences, but it will inevitably be revived because its function will sooner or later be recognized as indispensable.

Other Community Developments

"All that glitters is not gold." The renaissance that has been taking place in the rural community of Altona is not a Horatio Alger's story of community success. For every gain made an obstacle has been overcome and there are still many difficulties in the road ahead. Those who have had most to do with the renaissance in this community will tell you that a mere beginning has been made; that the real improvements are still in the future. But it cannot be denied that amazing gains have already been made and far-reaching plans are now incubating. Of genuine significance is the enthusiastic way in which the women of the community share in the development and activities of Altona. Their contribution to the local economic revival has been of great value.

A new town-hall has been erected; a new fire engine purchased; the old hospital is being replaced by a new \$45,000 structure which will be the finest rural hospital in Manitoba according to the Provincial Department of Health. A cold-storage co-operative locker organization has been formed and building plans made. Eight young men without resources but with plenty of idealism undertook to establish a co-operative farm. The enterprising young editor of the community newspaper, THE ALTONA ECHO, suggests that the Rhine-land Municipality engage a community engineer. He presses for improved streets, an adequate drainage system; for a Provincial highway through the Mennonite settlements to Winnipeg; for improved rail or bus transportation for the rural communities. In brief, Altona is demonstrating that a rural community can be reborn. What is happening in Altona can happen in varying degrees in a thousand rural communities throughout America.